

Saint Mary's College of California

## Saint Mary's Digital Commons

---

School of Liberal Arts Faculty Works

Scholarship, Research, Creative Activities, and  
Community Engagement

---

6-1-2015

### Food justice and sustainability: a new revolution

Patrizia Longo

Saint Mary's College of California, [plongo@stmarys-ca.edu](mailto:plongo@stmarys-ca.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.stmarys-ca.edu/school-liberal-arts-faculty-works>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

#### Repository Citation

Longo, Patrizia. Food justice and sustainability: a new revolution (2015). *"Sustainability of Well-being" International Forum*. [paper]. <https://digitalcommons.stmarys-ca.edu/school-liberal-arts-faculty-works/1850>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship, Research, Creative Activities, and Community Engagement at Saint Mary's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Liberal Arts Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Saint Mary's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@stmarys-ca.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@stmarys-ca.edu).

Florence “Sustainability of Well-Being International Forum”. 2015: Food for Sustainability and not just food, FlorenceSWIF2015

## Food justice and sustainability: a new revolution

Patrizia Longo\*

*Saint Mary's College of California, Department of Politics, 1928 St Mary's Road, Moraga, Ca 94556, USA*

---

### Abstract

Urban agriculture has become one of the fastest growing types of agriculture in the United States. Establishing more localized food systems, with the aim of achieving social justice goals, has become an important strategy for developing sustainable urban food systems that try to alleviate food insecurity. Two main approaches address food security: the environmental approach seeks to establish a sustainable food system, and the social justice approach aims to eliminate poverty. These two approaches correspond to the two main dimensions of food security: the production and supply of an adequate quality and quantity of food, and the ability of people to access food.

I will document the history of the Urban Farmers, a grassroots organization in Lafayette, California, which endeavoured to address both issues of poverty and sustainability in a community-development approach to food security. Its project emphasizes making the food system local and fostering the development of community.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of Fondazione Simone Cesaretti

*Keywords: Urban Farmers; community-development; right to food; food security; sustainability; social justice*

---

### 1. Food security: two approaches

While it seems that there is an endless supply of food in United States, many people find themselves lacking access to food, particularly healthy food, since buying fresh, organic produce is beyond the reach of many. Food security eludes millions of Americans who suffer chronic under-consumption of adequate nutrients. Hamm and Bellows describe food security as being achieved when all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes self-reliance and social justice (2003,

---

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [plongo57@gmail.com](mailto:plongo57@gmail.com)

37).

There are two main approaches that address food security: the environmental approach seeks to establish a sustainable food system, and the social justice approach aims to eliminate poverty. These two approaches correspond to the two main dimensions of food security: the production and supply of an adequate quality and quantity of food, and the ability of people to access food.

The sustainable-food-systems approach to food security has roots in the political and economic critique of the contemporary food system and in the environmental movement. From the political and economic perspective, corporate control of the food system and the commodification of food are the predominant threats to food security (Freidmann 1993, 216). The environmental perspective strengthened the food-system critique by showing that environmental degradation poses imminent threats to human living standards and well-being (Buttel 1993). According to the environmental perspective, the capitalistic food system completely disregards its environmental and human costs and is thus unsustainable.

When food is produced through an industrial system and distributed through a global supply chain, the inputs into food production, processing, and shipping generate enormous environmental stresses that cause pollution of the land, air, rivers, and streams and place health burdens on farm workers and other food producers. Long distance transport means emissions from trucks, ships, airplanes, and rail engines. The social justice approach extends the environmental view towards food issues by providing a systems approach. It links loss of farmland to the pressures of urban sprawl and abandonment of inner-city areas.

The social justice approach focuses on the persistence of people dropping in and out of hunger, even as we experience an obesity crisis, including obesity among the hungry. Our emergency food system, portrayed as the primary provider for those experiencing hunger, is incapable of meeting the high demand for food, which has only increased in the past three decades. Thus the anti-poverty, or social justice, approach to food security starts from the premise that the United States has an adequate food supply and food insecurity results from people's lack of access to food. In other words, poor people lack money to buy healthy, fresh, nutritious food. It is therefore crucial to separate food security from the struggle for income security. When food exists primarily within the marketplace, food insecurity is directly related to lack of income. Thus we are confronted with the absurdity of continued food insecurity in a wealthy world: the food is there but is not accessible to many who need it.

Establishing more localized food systems, with the aim of achieving social justice goals, is an important strategy for developing sustainable urban food systems. Hamm and Baron propose that a sustainable food system, among other things, "incorporate social justice issues into a more localized system; alleviate constraints on people's access to adequate, nutritious food; develop the economic capacity of local people to purchase food" (Hamm and Baron 1999, 55).

The environmentalist Paul Hawken writes that "the environmental movement is critical to our survival. Our house is literally burning, and it is only logical that environmentalists expect the social justice movement to get on the environmental bus. But is is the other way around; the only way we are going to put out the fire is to get on the social justice bus and heal our wounds, because, in the end, there is only one bus" (Hawken 2007, 190).

## 2. Case Study: The Urban Farmers

The Urban Farmers in Lafayette, California is a grassroots organization which attempts to address both issues of social justice and sustainability through a community-development approach to food security. Its goal is to make the food system local and to foster the development of community.

Lafayette, a former farming area, spans 15 miles, has a low population density with plenty of unused land and yard space, and a Mediterranean climate perfect for growing food. Even so, virtually all of the fruit and vegetables that Lafayette residents currently consume come from farms outside of Contra Costa County, and thus must be packaged, refrigerated, preserved, and transported to Lafayette. Therefore, one of the initial goals of the Urban Farmers was to lessen the environmental, health, and social impacts of this process by providing healthy, local food to people in the community. The goal of growing food locally was to produce "zero mile food" (sustainable food), but this method did not just reduce or eliminate the environmental costs of transportation. It also eliminated the packaging, pesticides (herbicides and insecticides) and monocultures used in the majority of the food industry that cause harm to the environment and, potentially, consumers' health. Additionally, the social impacts of current food

production can be significant for the workers who receive low pay and are exposed to toxic chemicals. The objective of the Urban Farmers was to tackle these problems by producing local, organic food in a socially just manner. Then the produce would be donated to local nonprofit organizations, assuring availability of healthy food to the larger community.

Hunger in America is at an all time high and while the long, drawn-out recession and the equally long, drawn-out recovery have taken their toll on communities across the country, shortage of food is not one of the problems. In fact, more than 40% of all food grown in America goes to waste. Basically, while food rots on one end of town, people go hungry on the other end. Therefore, the first problem that the Urban Farmers set out to address was locating the excess food and moving it to where it was needed at a reasonable cost.

At the beginning of the summer of 2009, Siamack Sioshansi and his son Cameron designed a pilot program for Lafayette to find out which techniques would work best for growing food in residents' yards. They found 168 families willing to volunteer their backyards, but given the initial limitations of the project they were able to choose only 20 of those families to participate.

I was planning to teach "Food Politics" in the spring of 2010 and looking for a community partner for the students' community-based research component of the course. I saw a call for participants for the Urban Farmers' project in the local paper and contacted Siamack. We met at the local coffee shop and were very excited about working together, especially considering that we would have about twenty young people eager to help. So the pilot program went into effect.

My students were in charge of studying the environmental impact of the project, learning about preparing the soil, planting and harvesting. They also helped to develop a web site for the organization and did some outreach in the community to inform people of the project (for example, distributing flyers and setting up information tables on Earth Day).

On a typical harvest day, usually a Saturday morning, our truck loaded with ladders, buckets, crates and picking poles, rolled up to a home in Lafayette at 10 am sharp. In about an hour, our volunteers (ranging from 8 to 70 years old) harvested, say, ninety pounds of persimmons. We would leave a small bag for the homeowner, loaded the truck and moved on to the next home. The questions to be answered are: How many people does this harvest feed, and much does this harvest cost?

The answers are quite simple. On average a farmer has to grow 5 pounds of food to feed one person for one day. Ninety pounds of fresh fruit can feed 18 people for a day. As for the operating costs of the harvest, since we are an all-volunteer, virtual organization, our biggest costs are insurance, fuel, maintenance and depreciation of the equipment. On average it costs us 12 cents per pound to harvest fruit, thus in this case the total cost of this harvest would be \$10.80.

Finally, all the backyard fruit we harvest is grown naturally and is as good as any organic food we can buy. This means, using the above example, collectively we fed 18 people the equivalent of three square meals of fresh, healthy food at a cost of \$10.80: this comes to 60 cents per person per day.

One can justifiably argue that this is not the full cost of production. The home owner bought the tree and took care of it, volunteers paid for gas and there was wear and tear on their belongings and without hunger relief organizations, we could not get the food to where it needs to go. However, while the exact cost of feeding the hungry can be debated, one can triple our current costs and still feed a person for under \$2 per day. "Social production" is about a lot of people each doing a little, and using the existing infrastructure (including mother nature) for the benefit of the community.

There have been various environmental benefits, health benefits, and social benefits generated by this project. Families have been given healthy, sustainable produce; the land used for farming has been enhanced naturally; students and homeowners have gained agricultural knowledge; and the use of fuel for transportation, plastic for packaging, and traditional agricultural chemicals to raise crops were unnecessary to grow the produce enjoyed through this project. Surprisingly, several homeowners documented a 20-30% decrease in water use below last year's levels. While some of the reduction could be due to a relatively cooler summer in 2010, it is likely due to replacing their lawn with a low-water-use farm or an increased awareness they developed towards water use.

The main challenge to sustainable agriculture in Lafayette is the hard clay soil. The quick and easy fix to deal with any difficult soil is to build raised beds; however, cutting down redwood trees for this purpose is not an ideal solution, as compensating such environmental damage would require years of backyard farming. Instead, with

patience, the hard clay soil can be converted to usable soil by planting cover crops, crops that add organic matter to the soil and open up the compacted clay structures, making the soil better suited to support future crops. He used vetch, bell bean and cereal rye as the combination to overcome the clay soil problems. Once they were grown and harvested, though through greater time and effort, they successfully and sustainably took the place of tilling the soil and incorporating organic fertilizers.

The community support for the project has been enormous. We had many more people volunteering to be part of the farming project than we could take on, so we decided to create a training and support group for those who could not be in the initial project. People have contributed to the project in many ways. A soil engineer donated his services as did a local landscaper; a plumbing supply house helped with the acquisition of necessary supplies; a farmer donated a tractor and farm supplies; and a local restaurant chef created recipes for the produce harvested.

In its most basic form, this project is like a factory. The Urban Farmers take in raw materials (fruit on the tree), process it (harvest), and deliver the finished goods to wherever it is needed. The only difference is that instead of the profits going to the shareholders, the beneficiary of the surplus is the community.

The framework of this project is called by many names, including Social Production, Civic Capitalism, and Open Source Production. It implies that a group of people, with a shared vision and a “plausible promise,” can use new technologies to form new kinds of groups that can harness the free and ready participation of a large organization with varying talents and skill sets. The real life examples of this idea are most easily seen in the software development field (e.g., Wikipedia). The Urban Farmers borrowed that concept and used it to deal with our broken food system and its associated social justice issues.

Clay Shirky, NYU professor, in a TED Talk estimates that there is over a trillion hours per year of cognitive surplus (volunteer time + connectivity tools) available to solve problems. In fact, this is the idea that powers open-source software and projects like Wikipedia, where a relatively small group of people work together to create value for the rest of us. The one common feature that technology-based collaborative systems have is that participants can be anywhere, doing what they want for the project, at a time of their choosing.

The Urban Farmers developed a physical version of open source production. They succeeded in mobilizing a large number of people and designed the project where each volunteer was asked to do a small part, then directed the collective energy of the group at a specific problem through a well-designed set of methods and procedures.

We are now in the fifth year of the Urban Farmers project; it has expanded so much that two questions now need to be addressed: 1) what happens to the costs of the production as the organization grows? and 2) how do you expand the “factory” so more people can be involved?

If we try to use the corporate model of growth which requires us to hire employees and managers, and managers to manage the managers, the production cost, in spite of donated labour and donated material, can quickly exceed the cost of buying the food.

Instead, this project can expand horizontally into other communities, near and far, at very low costs, supporting semi-independent (or totally independent) gleaning chapters. All of the software tools such as the registration system, relationship management tools, distribution, communication and project management tools are cloud-based and are either free or cost very little. In addition, the outreach programs, legal structure, and community engagement work are shareable and free.

As for keeping the cost of local production down, the same deployment design allows local teams to use the Urban Farmers’ “lending library” of tools and equipment to perform multiple harvests at multiple locations simultaneously. So five years since its inception, the project is moving from a controlled, centralized effort to a decentralized and democratic model of civic engagement. The owner of the fruit trees are matched with the local volunteers, so neighbours can help neighbours, lowering the fences that separate us, that separate the private and public spaces, both really and metaphorically. A fully democratized system of volunteering, where community members can work when they want, where they want, with whom they want, and then are able to donate the result of their work to a charity of their choice is central to keeping the community engaged and costs of operation in check.

The project has also expanded vertically “beyond fruit.” Schools throw away a lot of perfectly good food; so do grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, and many other entities along the food chain. A group of volunteers, the “White Pony Express,” has partnered with food retailers who have surplus food (grocery stores, restaurants, farmers markets, bakeries, school lunch programs, and caterers) and delivers this surplus directly to 501(c)(3) organizations providing food to those in need in Contra Costa County. Their 41 recipient organizations include homeless shelters,

recovery facilities, homes for the disabled, meal providers, pantries, day-labour centres, and cooking classes for low-income students. The White Pony Express was founded on September 22, 2013, by Carol Weyland Conner, spiritual director of Sufism Reoriented. In just its first year, the program has become wildly popular. In March 2014, Sufism Reoriented helped provide seed funding so that White Pony Express could be incorporated as an independent nonprofit public-benefit 501(c)(3) corporation. The amount of nutritious food rescued has soared from zero to over 3,000 pounds...every day. Virtually all of this food went unused before White Pony Express made the link between those with surplus and those in need. Now over 100 donors and 41 recipient partners form a strong circle of giving. At a cost of less than five cents per pound, over \$1,000,000 of food (at a highly discounted value) was delivered to those in need in their first year. Their 250 volunteers rescued over 600,000 pounds of food, enough to serve more than 400,000 meals to their neighbours (<http://whiteponyexpress.org>).

Clearly the Urban Farmers has been and continues to be very successful in its endeavour to organize community residents and feed many hungry people. Its model goes beyond charity as it focuses on the interdependence of human beings; as Martin Luther King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, on April 16, 1963, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

### 3. Food as a Human Right

The issue of hunger and lack of access to healthy food will not go away unless there is a structural solution. It is therefore important to talk about food as a fundamental human right, so that the problem of hunger is framed not as a problem of individuals, but as one of communities involved in the organization and structure of the food system.

Food as a human right has long been a core demand among food justice advocates. Over the years, numerous international declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Preamble to the UN Food and Agriculture organization, and the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, have declared that food is a basic human right and that it is also linked to the goal of eliminating poverty and hunger.

The "Four Freedoms" address of U.S. President Roosevelt, in January 1941, was of special importance in the preparation of the Declaration, which included freedom from want as one of those rights. In his 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt had advocated the adoption of an "Economic Bill of Rights," stating that "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. Necessitous men are not free men. People who are hungry and out of jobs are the stuff of which dictatorships are made" (quoted in Barry 2012, 166).

A long time ago, Aristotle wrote that charity does not belong in a democracy as it creates first- and second-class citizens and fosters the sense of superiority of the rich and the sense of shame and envy of the poor, thus opening the door to strife and instability. He took poverty and the threat of starvation to be matters of collective concern, not to be left entirely to wealthy individuals to resolve through charity. Since chance plays a role in determining how many external resources one has (NE I.81099a31-b7, I.9 1100a8-9; Politics VII.12 1331b19-22), Aristotle suggests a system of private ownership in which citizens know that they can count on support from others if they are ever in need as the privately owned resources of other citizens will be made available to them. In fact Aristotle says that "possessions should not be held in common...but should be common in their use, as it befits friends, and none of the citizens should be in need of food" (VII.10 1329b41-1330a2). No one need fear poverty because, when the doctrine of common use is accepted among citizens, each is assured that he will have the use of the property of others in times of need. That acceptance is fostered by custom and an education that will instil in the citizens a sense of friendship and civic unity (1263b36-1264a1).

The Urban Farmers organization has developed a community model that is similar to what Aristotle had proposed. Every community member contributes what they can; some will contribute fruit or vegetables, others transportation, others labour, tools, etc. and in the end all is shared. They believe, as Amartya Sen (1992) argued, that poverty results from a lack of "capacity" to earn income, to make informed decisions, or to fight discrimination or injustice due to such factors as poor health, unsafe living conditions, lack of education or unemployment.

The Urban Farmers maintain that the individual approach of contributing money and/or time to various charities is not, by itself, going to solve the problem of hunger, although it is not morally insignificant if it can help alleviate it to some degree. As Henry Shue writes, "Individual donations by individual donors ... are at best too little, too late, too uncoordinated" (1996,128).

Moreover, it is arguable that the charity model does not sufficiently focus on the dignity of the individuals in



need of aid and private charitable efforts by themselves have not succeeded in solving this problem. Thus, if one is really serious about solving it, the only reasonable thing to do is to concentrate on establishing social arrangements that can do so. This is not to say that direct charitable aid is unimportant but, rather, to say that establishing more just social and economic arrangements that will assure people food security is even more important. As Balakrishnan and Narayan write (1996,242),

While ... the brunt of the moral obligations to alleviate poverty and hunger fall on national and international policy making institutions, ... the existence of widespread hunger and poverty creates certain obligations on the part of individual citizens.

The Urban Farmers in Lafayette, California have taken seriously the moral obligations to be active and concerned citizens of a democratic community. They have shown that there is a desire to find community with others, to get involved, to find a voice, to take a stand. That desire to achieve social change in community with others has materialized in their taking small steps together and in savouring the journey of engagement and drawing strength from its challenges. They have demonstrated that only as a community with a strategic vision and a common program, can we make progress toward a more equitable, sustainable, and just food system. This is the new revolution.

"People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time"

--Dorothy Day

## References

- Aristotle, 2013. *The Politics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Balakrishnan R., Narayan, U., 1996. Combining Justice with Development: Rethinking Rights and Responsibilities in the Context of World Hunger and Poverty, in *World Hunger and Morality*. In Aiken W., LaFollette, H. (Eds.). Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, pp. 231-247.
- Barry, J., 2012. *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability: Human Flourishing in a Climate-Changed, Carbon Constrained World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, F. L., 1981. World Hunger, Human Rights, and the Right to Revolution. *Social Praxis* 8(1-2), 5-30.
- Buttel, F. 1993. The production of agricultural sustainability: observations from the sociology of science and technology, in *Food for the future: conditions and contradictions of sustainability*. In Allen, P. (Ed.). Wiley & sons, Inc., New York, pp. 19-45.
- Freidmann, H., 1993. After Midas' feast: alternative food regimes for the future, in *Food for the future: conditions and contradictions of sustainability*. In Allen, P. (Ed.). Wiley & sons, Inc., New York, pp. 213-233.
- Hamm, M. W., Baron, M., 1999. Developing an Integrated , Sustainable Urban Food System: The Case of New Jersey, U.S., in *For Hunger-Proof Cities*. In Koc, M. et al. (Eds), International Development Research Centre, Ontario, Canada, pp. 54-59.
- Hamm, M., Bellows, A., 2003. Community Food security and Nutrition Educators. *Journal of Nutrition Education Behavior* 35, 37-43.
- Hawken, P., 2007. *Blessed Unrest*. Penguin Books, New York.
- Sen, A., 1992. *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Shue, H., 1996. Solidarity among Strangers and the Right to Food, in *World Hunger and Morality*. In Aiken W., LaFollette H. (Eds.). Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, pp. 113-132.